

# The Delicate Princess

## By Edgar Jepson

In the life of the Deeping Villages the mere letting of Muttie Deeping Grange was no unimportant event; but the inhabitants of Great Deeping, Muttie Deeping (possibly a descendant of Middle Deeping) and Little Deeping were stirred to the very depths of their being when the news came that it had been let to a German Princess. The women at any rate, awaited her coming with the liveliest interest and curiosity, emotion dashed somewhat from their eyes by the fact that they learned that Princess Elizabeth of Cassel-Nassau was only thirteen years and seven months old.

The Twins did not share the excited curiosity of their neighbors. They resented the fact that the tenant of Muttie Deeping Grange was a German Princess. Erebus was more resentful than the Terror; and it is to be suspected that the high patriotic spirit she displayed in the matter was in some degree owing to the fact that Mrs. Blenkinsop, the chief gossip of the neighborhood, had been after her for some time past, endeavoring to get the grandfathers, grandmothers, uncles, cousins, and aunts of the Princess, ended by saying, with meaning, "What a model she will be to the little girls of the neighborhood!"

The spirit of Erebus was high, not by any means due to brood the thought of a model nearly two months younger than herself. She did not hide from the Terror her dark conviction that the coming of the Princess was but a phase of the German invasion which was presently to sweep England from sea to sea with fire and sword.

When presently the Princess came to the Grange, the lively curiosity of her neighbors was gratified by her imperfect vision of her. She did not, as they had expected, attend any of the three churches, for she had brought with her her own Lutheran pastor. They only saw her on her afternoon drives, a stiff little figure, thickly veiled against the sun, sitting bolt upright in the victoria beside the crimson baroness (crimson in face; she wore black) in whose charge she had come to England.

They had learned presently that the Princess had come to Muttie Deeping for her health; that she was delicate, and her doctors feared lest she should develop consumption; they hoped that a summer and autumn in the excellent Deeping air would strengthen her. The news created a little of the cold hostility of Erebus.

But the fact that she was one of the people which was going to sweep England with fire and sword was not without its influence on the Twins' resolve to raid the famous peach-garden of Muttie Deeping Grange. Their mother was out of sorts; and Dr. Arbuthnot had ordered her to eat plenty of fruit. Peaches were the best fruit in season; and the peaches in the Grange garden were said to be finer than any peaches grown in a hothouse. The Twins had never been able to believe that the laws of *Mum and Tum* applied to fruit.

It was in the afternoon, a sweltering afternoon, after the doctor's visit, and the Twins were about to set forth on their bicycles, without any goal in mind, when a sudden gleam came into the deep blue eyes of the Terror, and he said:

"I've got an idea."

An answering light gleamed in the brown eyes of Erebus; and she cried joyfully: "Thank goodness! I was beginning to think that nothing was ever going to occur to us again! It must be the hot weather."

"Those Germans," said the Terror slowly. "Why shouldn't we make a raid on the Grange peachery?"

"Rather!" cried Erebus; and her pliant face was all aglow with stirring spirit. Then after a pause she added reluctantly, "But if the Princess is an invalid, perhaps she wants them herself."

"She can't want all of them. Why, we couldn't. There are hundreds," said the Terror. "And they're the very thing for Mum. Plum are all very well; but one gets tired of them."

"But how are we going to get into the garden? The door in the wall only opens on the inside," said Erebus thoughtfully.

"We're not," said the Terror. "Hurry up and get some leaves to put between the peaches. Mum will like them better with the bloom on, though it really doesn't make any difference to the taste."

Erebus ran into the kitchen garden; and when she came back she found the Terror tying a small landing-net to the back of his bicycle. She put the leaves into her bicycle-basket; and they rode slowly to Muttie Deeping.

The Twins knew the country round thoroughly; and they came unobserved along the screen of the home wood to the fringe of trees which runs along the walled garden behind the Grange. That fringe of trees was indeed useful; standing on a low branch of one of them, the Terror raised his head cautiously above the wall and surveyed the garden. A dancing shimmer of heat rose above the fruit trees, trailed low. It was empty and silent save for a curious snoring sound which disquieted him little, since he ascribed it to some distant pig.

He stepped on to a higher branch, leaned over the wall and surveyed the golden burden of the tree below him. He chose his peach, the ripest he could see, slipped his net under it, flicked it, lifted the peach in it over the wall, and lowered it down to Erebus.

The garden was not as empty as the Terror believed. On a garden chair in the little lawn in the middle of it sat the Princess Elizabeth, hidden from him by the thick wall of a trained pear-tree; and in a chair beside her sat, or rather sprawled, her guardian,

the Baroness Frederica Von Aschersleben. The Baroness added nothing to the old-world charm of the garden. Her eyes were shut, her mouth was open, her face was most painfully crimson; and from her short, but extremely tip-tilted nose, came the sound of snoring which the Terror had ascribed to some distant pig.

The Princess was warmly, very warmly, dressed for the sweltering afternoon; and little beads of sweat stood on her brow. The story-book she had been trying to read lay face downward in her lap; and she was gazing round the shimmering garden with a look of intolerable discomfort and boredom on her pretty pale face.

Then a moving object came into the range of her vision, just beyond the end of the wall of pear-tree, a moving object against the garden wall. She could not see what it was; but it seemed to her that a peach rose and vanished over the top of the wall. This curious behavior of a peach so roused her curiosity that, in spite of the heat, she rose and walked quietly to the end of the wall of pear-tree. As she came beyond it, she found, leaning over the wall a fair-haired boy.

He was bringing the net over the wall again; but at the sight of her he whipped it back again; and they gazed at one another in an equal surprise.

Surprise did not rob the Terror of his politeness; he smiled amiably and said in his most agreeable tone, "How do you do?"

He did not know how much the Princess had seen; and he was not going to make admission of guilt by a haughty, and perhaps needless, flight.

"How do you do?" said the Princess a little haughtily, hesitating. "What are you doing up there?"

"I'm looking at the garden," said the Terror truthfully, but not quite accurately, for he was looking much more at the Princess.

She gazed at him, her brow knitted in a little perplexed frown. She thought that he had been taking the peaches, but she was not sure; and his serene, guileless face, and bluish blue eyes gave the suspicion the lie.

He gazed at her with growing interest and approval; as much approval as one could give to a girl. The Princess Elizabeth had beautiful gray eyes; and though her pale cheeks were a little hollow, and the line from the cheekbone to the corner of the chin was so straight that it made her face almost triangular, it was a pretty face. She looked fragile; and he felt sorry for her.

"The garden's very hot," he said. "It's like holding one's face over an oven."

"Oh, it is!" said the Princess with impatient weariness.

"Yet there's quite a decent little breeze blowing over the top of the wall," said the Terror.

The Princess sighed; and they gazed at one another with curious eyes.

"I tell you what: come out into the wood. I know an awfully cool place. You'll find it very refreshing," said the Terror.

The Princess looked back irresolutely at the sleeping Baroness. The sight of her crimson face made the garden feel better than ever.

"Do come," his sister's here; and it will be very jolly in the wood—the three of us," said the Terror in his most persuasive tone.

The Princess hesitated, and again she looked back at the sleeping, but unobserved, Baroness; then she said with a truly German frankness:

"Are you well-born?"

The Terror in his turn smiled a little laughingly; and he said slowly, "Well, from what Mrs. Blenkinsop said, the Dangerfields were barons in the wood before there were any Dangerfields. And they did very well at Crecy and Agincourt, too," he added positively.

The Princess seemed reassured; she cast back one more look at the sleeping Baroness, then walked to the door in the garden wall. When she came through it she found the Twins sheltering their bicycles toward it. The Terror in a very dignified fashion introduced Erebus to her as Violet Anastasia Dangerfield and himself as Hyacinth Wolfram Dangerfield. He gave their full and so little used names, because he felt that in the case of a princess etiquette demanded it. Then they moved along the fringe of trees and turned into the wood. The Twins shortened their strides to suit the pace of the Princess which was uncommonly slow. She kept looking from one to the other with curious, rather timid, pleased eyes.

When she told them that she had not been in the home wood before, the Terror cried in surprise, "But it's the loveliest part of the whole estate!"

"But I always stay in the gardens," the Baroness Von Aschersleben cannot walk far; and she does not like me to be out of sight of her," said Erebus.

"Slack? What is slack?" said the Princess.

"She means weak—not able to run fast or far," said the Terror.

"But I never run. It is not dignified. The Baroness would be shocked," said the Princess.

"No wonder you're delicate," said Erebus, politely trying to keep a touch of contempt out of her tone, and failing.

"One cannot help being delicate," said the Princess.

"I don't know," said the Terror, doubtfully. "If you're in the open air a lot and run about, you don't keep delicate. Wiggins used to be delicate; but he isn't now."

"Who is Wiggins?" said the Princess.

"He's a friend of ours—not so old as we are—quite a little boy," said Erebus in a patronizing tone, which Wiggins had been present, would have resented with extreme bitterness.

"Besides, Dr. Arbuthnot said that if you were always in the open air, playing with children of your own age, you'd soon get strong."

"We should like to. But we'd better meet you at the edge of the wood—just about the same time. The keepers aren't about much then—especially if it's hot. Tom Cobb says they're asleep."

"Yes! I'll come then. The Baroness is asleep, too," said the Princess eagerly.

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pool the moment she looked chill. He picked out for her the rabbits at their meals. He even brushed out her hair, for the thick golden mass was quite beyond the management of the Princess, and Erebus firmly refused to play lady-maid. Since the Terror was one of those who enjoy doing those things which they are called upon to do, he presently forgot the unimportance of the occupation, and began to take pleasure in handling the silken strands.

It was on the fifth day after a bath, when he was brushing out her hair in the sun on the top of the Knoll that he received the severe shock. Heaven knows that the Princess was not a demonstrative child; indeed, she had never had the chance. But he had just finished his task and was surveying the shining result with satisfaction, when of a sudden, without any warning, she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Oh, you are nice," she said.

The Terror's ineffable serenity was for once scattered to the winds. He flushed and gazed round the woods with horror-stricken eyes; if anyone should have seen it!

The Princess noticed his trouble, and said in a tone of distress, "Don't you like me to kiss you?"

The Terror swallowed the lump of horror in his throat, and said faintly but gallantly: "Yes—Oh, rather."

"Then kiss me," said the Princess simply, snuggling closer to him.

The Terror's eyes were closed, and he kissed her gingerly.

"I am fond of you, you know," said the Princess in a frankly proprietary tone.

The Terror's scattered wits at last worked. He rose to his feet and said quickly: "Yes. Let's be getting to the others."

The Princess rose obediently.

But the ice was broken; and the kisses of the Princess if not frequent, were at any rate not rare. The Terror at first endured them; then he came rather to like them. But he strictly enjoined discretion on her. Discretion and kisses, however, have no natural affinity; and without their knowing it, Wiggins became aware of the practice.

The confidence between the Twins had always been so full that he was not aware that they were letting a cat out of a bag when he said to Erebus: "I suppose the Terror's in love with the Princess, kissing her like that. I think it's awfully silly." And he spurned the earth.

Erebus's dark face was all one dusky flush, as, somewhat breathlessly, she drew from Wiggins his little story. Then she rose and with clenched fists and blazing eyes, sought the Princess. She found her lying back drowsily against a bank, and forthwith cried fiercely:

"Princess or no Princess, you shan't kiss him!"

The Princess's feet; and the Princess snarled. Her gray eyes darkened and sparkled. She had never made a face in